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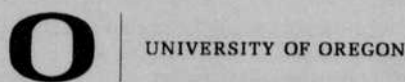
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Yankees, Bronx pose problems for Minnesota

The New York Yankees and the house of horrors await Minnesota on Thursday in the playoffs

By Gordon Wittenmyer
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

NEW YORK — The Minnesota Twins ruled the day on Tuesday.

But when their best-of-five playoff series resumes with Game 2 against the New York Yankees on Thursday night, they will walk into a different Yankee Stadium — a dramatically lit, foreboding place where angry faces scream from the shadows in the chilled Bronx night.

More than any early afternoon game in late September played in front of a late-arriving crowd, Thursday night's game will give the Twins the full impact of the Yankee Stadium aura and mystique in the postseason. A night game in October. The cold white glare of the stadium lights. Fifty-thousand wrathful, obnoxious fans looking for a beer, if not a fight. Maybe even a ghost or two haunting the corridors and power alleys of the hallowed baseball grounds.

"We definitely felt that," Twins infielder Chris Gomez said of his 1998 San Diego Padres team that was swept by the Yankees in the World Series. "I'm not going to say it's intimidating. But when we had our game (Tuesday) changed to a day game, I said that's fine."

Gomez said he and outfielder Michael Cuddyer, who was on the Twins' playoff roster last year, talked on Tuesday about the less imposing atmosphere for Game 1 than they had expected. For Gomez, who experienced only the electrically charged night games there in '98, the difference is day and night.

"It's a big difference. I can't pinpoint it. I can't tell you why," he said. "We both were talking about how it maybe didn't feel — not intense — but maybe as playoff-like as it would."

If the change of game time doesn't bring a harder edge to the natural menace of the place for the visiting team, then the bad mood the Twins inflicted on New York City with their 3-1 victory in Game 1 almost certainly will.

"It's always Yankee Stadium. If the sun's out or it's dark, it doesn't make a difference," Twins first baseman Doug Mientkiewicz said. "It's a great atmosphere to play in. When you come in here to play, you understand you have to have, hopefully, a three-run lead in the ninth inning because they're going to make a push. This place is amazing."

And if the Twins escape New York with a 2-0 series lead, they will know

they earned it.

"We know they're coming," Mientkiewicz said. "To win this, we have to play two games probably above what we're capable of doing, and we had to do that against Oakland (to win a series last year)."

Right-hander Brad Radke (14-10), who earned recognition as a big-game pitcher last year with three dominating playoff starts against Oakland and Anaheim (2-0, 1.96 earned-run average), starts on Thursday night for the Twins against 20-game winner Andy Pettitte.

That experience, along with the early lead in the series, should make a difference for the Twins when the sun goes down and the lights go up on Thursday night. It already seems to have created a more veteran, businesslike demeanor in them than the exuberant, almost wide-eyed response to last year's playoffs.

"I think that comes with a little more experience," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire said. "The guys are so emotional out on the field. They took some deep breaths and let out some air (after the win). They understand we've got to win two more games. They do understand those things. We've been there at least once."

And the fight for their lives in September to get to the playoffs after a disappointing first half of the season has played a role.

"We've played only one game, and the game went our way, and we played pretty good," Gardenhire said. "I don't know if relaxed is the word, but our players are pretty confident."

So bring on the night. And whatever it brings with it.

"It'll be darker," Gardenhire said. "But this is a hell of a place to play whether it's day or night. Maybe it'll be a different crowd. Maybe there are a few more kids during the day. . . ."

"A playoff game at Yankee Stadium is a playoff game at Yankee Stadium," right fielder Jacque Jones said. "They're going to be going crazy."

And in the crazy din of Thursday night's must-win game for New York, the Twins might find it hard to hear themselves think, much less remember Tuesday's victory.

"Right now it means nothing," Mientkiewicz said. "They're not going to roll over and die. They've been there before; down two games to none against one of the best pitching staffs in baseball."

The Yankees stormed back to beat Oakland in the 2001 first-round series after Oakland won the first two games at Yankee Stadium.

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